

HOW TO...

Create watercolour effects

Adam Banks shows you how you can improve on Photoshop's watercolour filter by creating effects from different features of the program and adding them all together

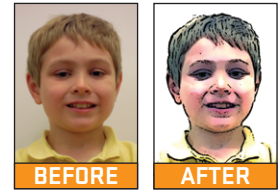


Image-editing programs offer menus full of artistic filters that promise to turn any photo into a work of art in traditional media such as oil paint. If you've ever tried using them, however, you'll have found they rarely do what you think they should.

It's not surprising that software can't paint, much as computers aren't very good at writing poetry. If you really want a post-Impressionist canvas of your goldfish, you'll have to go to art classes. But you can get reasonably convincing results out of your PC with a little human intervention. The trick is not to try to do everything with one filter. Instead, break down the effect you want into its constituent parts, use a different method to produce each of them and then put the whole lot together using layers.

Here's an example that mimics illustrations done in watercolour over pencil or ink outlines. We used Photoshop Elements 4. This has a good range of artistic effects, but its Watercolour filter is pretty hopeless, especially for portraits. A combination of other filters can give better results. You can adapt the same principles to help you get more creative in any image editor. If you'd like to follow this tutorial exactly as shown here, download the photo from our cover disc.

1 Run Photoshop Elements and choose Edit, Enhance Photos. Go to File, Open and select your image. The photo needn't be great – this portrait shot isn't very well lit or sharply focused – but avoid excessive JPEG compression, as this can produce unwanted effects. For best results, work at a medium resolution. This

example is 1,800x1,200 pixels (2.2 megapixels). At higher resolutions, many filters will be too subtle. First, choose Auto Color Correction from the Enhance menu, or press the Shift, Ctrl and B keys simultaneously. This removes any colour cast, such as the reddish tint on our original photo, and brings out the full range of colours in the photo, which will improve the finished picture. Now copy the photo into a new layer. From the Layer menu, choose Duplicate Layer and click OK. You'll see the new layer listed in the Layers palette at the right (if this isn't visible, choose Layers from the Window menu).

2 Set the Foreground colour to black, which can be done by pressing D (for Default colours). Then go to Filter, Sketch, Photocopy. Set the Darkness slider about halfway (25), then adjust the Detail slider. Make the setting high enough that the main outlines are clear and hard-edged, but low enough that these don't start to fill in and obscure details.

Finally, try to balance both sliders so that the outlines you really want are dark and solid, while the blotches speckling the rest of the image are lighter. The best settings will depend on your particular photo. Click OK.

3 Go to Enhance, Adjust Lighting, Levels (or press Ctrl and L) to open the Levels dialog box. Drag the white Input Levels slider to the left until most of the background blotches disappear, leaving just the outlines you want. Strengthen these by dragging the grey slider a little way to the right. Click OK.

4 In the Layers palette, change this layer's blending mode from Normal to Color Burn. The original photo shows through. Click on the Background layer to edit this. You've already picked out the salient features of the photos with your outlines, so your watercolours can be more washy. To prepare for this, go to Filter, Blur, Gaussian Blur and set the Radius to 16 pixels (adjust this if the resolution of your photo is different). Click OK.

5 Go to Filter, Artistic, Underpainting. Set Brush Size to maximum (reduce this if your photo is at a lower resolution) and Texture Coverage to a very small amount, so you just see a slight feathering around the edges of strokes. Set the Texture to Canvas, Scaling to 200% (100% for smaller photos), Light to Top Left, and Relief very low, for a subtle hint of texture. Click OK.

6 The colours are too flat and solid for watercolour. To fix this, duplicate the Background layer as in Step 1. In the Layers palette, drag the new copy to the top of the list above your outline layer, as this will help make the paint look as if it goes over the outlines. Choose a blending mode for this layer: to make the colouring more vibrant, pick Vivid Light. The colours are now too deep, so open the Levels dialog box (Ctrl-L) and reduce contrast by dragging the Output Levels sliders inwards. Tick the Preview option to judge the results by eye. We've left it off here so you can see how the Vivid Light effect looks before adjustment.

